

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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South Korea: Outlook for the National Assembly Election [redacted]

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Summary

The National Assembly election next Tuesday represents an important step in consolidating the position of President Roh Tae Woo. The ruling party hopes to parlay Roh's image as a reformer, its superior organization, and opposition factionalism into a majority win, but some ruling party officials fear a groundswell of popular support is building for the opposition. For their part, opposition politicians remain on the defensive--labeling Roh's democratization efforts a sham and warning voters that a legislature dominated by the ruling party will return to repressive tactics. [redacted]

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Winning a majority probably would extend Roh's political honeymoon and bolster support from his

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party for his agenda. It would certainly strengthen Roh's control over the bureaucracy and military. Rifts in opposition ranks continue to reflect the rivalry between leaders Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam; how their candidates fare in the election will be crucial in determining opposition strategy in the months ahead. []

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President Roh's public commitment to democratic reform has added new importance to next week's National Assembly election. In the past, South Korean presidents have used Assemblies largely as a rubberstamp. By pledging to hold fair elections and to delegate more authority to the legislature, Roh has promised significant change, raising the stakes for both the ruling and opposition parties (see inset). Indeed, Roh's power would be diminished if the opposition parties captured a majority. Roh's opponents would then have the power to hold hearings and other inquiries into the President's activities because the new Constitution provides for stronger parliamentary oversight. []

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How the opposition fares in the election will determine whether it takes a larger hand in shaping policy. As minority players in the previously weak legislature, the opposition used the Assembly mainly to attack the government. This record has dogged them on the campaign trail by underscoring their image as politicians who are the perennial "outs." A weak showing in the election would highlight their problems, leaving them politically isolated and essentially ineffectual. []

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A Look at the Old and New Election Law

Under pressure for political reform, the ruling party agreed to revise the National Assembly election law to allow freer competition for legislative seats. The old election law divided the country into 92 administrative districts--each with two representatives--for a total of 184 Assemblymen. An additional 92 appointed seats were awarded on the following basis: 61 to the party that won the most elected seats and 31 distributed among other parties in proportion to their share of the popular vote. The ruling party's strength in rural areas and superior organization, along with multiple opposition candidates in many districts, assured the government of at least a plurality of elected seats in the past two elections. Adding the 61 appointed seats gave the ruling party a solid parliamentary majority.

The new election law preserves the disproportional weight of rural districts, but is less skewed toward the government. It creates 224 single-seat districts and provides for 75 appointed

seats to be allocated on the following basis: if a party wins a majority of seats, it receives the same percentage of proportional seats--38 or more. The rest are distributed to the other parties according to the percentage of seats won. If no party wins a majority, the party that wins the most seats receives a majority of the appointed seats--38--and the remainder are allocated to the other parties on the basis of the percentage of seats won. [redacted]

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On the Campaign Trail...

Ruling Party Riding Roh's Coattails. Internal cohesion, a strong grassroots organization, and Roh's political honeymoon have given the ruling party a headstart in the campaign. Strategists have put Roh's personal stamp on the politicking--for example by orchestrating more "baby kissing" than was the case under Chun. In addition, ruling party candidates have campaigned on a platform of modest reforms, clean government, fair elections, continued political calm, and economic progress. [redacted]

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Roh's efforts to distance himself from Chun--in part to undercut the former President's influence--will also help the ruling party's election chances. At the party's nominating convention last month Roh purged hardline Chun loyalists--a move that both enhanced the party's moderate image and furthered Roh's control, according to the Embassy. Similarly, Roh's decision to allow a Justice Ministry investigation into Chun family corruption, and the subsequent arrest of Chun's brother for financial misdeeds, have bolstered the party's campaign claim of a return to clean government. Chun's brother's disgrace also forced the former President to resign his post as honorary president of the ruling party and head of the council of presidential advisers, putting to rest public suspicions that Chun's positions would enable him to manipulate Roh. [redacted]

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Other image-building efforts also are under way. [redacted]

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[redacted] questionable tactics by party candidates and the government could undermine the effort, in our view. According to the Embassy, scattered reports of traditional vote-getting tactics by ruling party members--including bribery--and the government's decision to bar several former student activists from running are the kind of activities

that could evoke memories of the repressive Chun era and hurt at the polls. [redacted] 25X1

Factionalism Cripples the Opposition. The rivalry between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam continues to dominate opposition politics, and to divide the vote in most districts:

- o The decision of the two Kims to run separate candidate slates will probably prevent the opposition from expanding its ranks in the National Assembly.¹ Political observers estimate the two parties will garner about 95 seats--about 33 percent of the total 299 seats--roughly equal to their percentage of seats in the outgoing Assembly.
- o According to the Embassy, the impact of separate candidate slates will hit hardest in urban areas--traditionally opposition strongholds--where a spread of the opposition vote will permit ruling party upsets.
- o Public bickering also has damaged the opposition's image, with press editorials questioning the opposition's ability to present a responsible and credible alternative to the government. [redacted] 25X1

Election Outlook

Despite apparent advantages, ruling party officials are growing increasingly nervous about the party's chances to win a majority of seats on Tuesday (see inset). Party strategists last week were confident of an easy majority win, but are now predicting the party will win no more than 105 districts,

[redacted] Such an outcome would give the party 143 seats--105 plus 38 appointed seats--leaving the party 7 seats short of a bare majority. Downward revisions of party predictions may reflect new inside information--for example private election polls--but could also be an attempt to rally rank and file members for a final voter blitz before Tuesday. Elections polls commissioned by newspapers last week indicate a large bloc of undecided voters remain and that apathy is growing among the electorate. [redacted] 25X1

¹The opposition won 91 of a total 276 seats in National Assembly elections in 1985. Frequent changes in party affiliation--including some minor party defections to the ruling party--make it difficult to estimate the opposition's current strength. [redacted] 25X1

What Could Go Wrong for the Ruling Party?

A lack of systematic preelection opinion polling makes it difficult to predict the election outcome, but several factors seem important for the ruling party's chances to win a majority of seats:

- o Opposition allegations of fraud in both the presidential and National Assembly campaigns have focused public attention on the government's election conduct. Any sign of blatant wrongdoing could help the opposition; [REDACTED]
- o The corruption issue has raised questions about Roh's service in the Chun government--a potential problem for the ruling party. Embassy reporting suggests some ruling party candidates from rural areas--where the economic fallout from Chun's brother's mishandling of development funds is hardest felt--may suffer from the corruption scandal.
- o Student demonstrations--always a part of spring politics--and labor unrest are increasing; [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Students so far have failed to spark popular support for rallies. If the government cracked down hard on a combination of demonstrations and labor unrest, it could revive popular antagonism toward the ruling camp. For his part, Roh is likely to avoid repressive measures that would remind the voters of Chun's behavior or Roh's ties to the previous regime. [REDACTED]

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Ruling party nervousness aside, some factors will work in the party's favor on election day, in our view. The advent of multiple opposition candidates in most districts has opened the way for ruling party candidates to win some district seats with only a plurality. We estimate that the party could win as little as 35 percent of the popular vote nationwide and still take 125--55 percent--of the elected seats. Such an outcome would leave the majority of the popular vote spread among several opposition parties. [REDACTED]

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Strong regional power bases and a national constituency in Seoul ensure each of the Kims will control a bloc of Assembly seats (see map). Most important, each Kim has partially conceded the field to the other in his home province:

- o Kim Young Sam's candidates will run against ruling party and independent opposition candidates in 20 of 37 districts in his home province, Kyongsang-namdo, and city, Pusan. Although most political observers believe Kim will split the region's seats with the ruling party, he is expected to take most of the 15 districts in Pusan, where he heads the ticket.
- o Kim Dae Jung's candidates will not face competition from Kim Young Sam in 17 of 37 races in the Cholla region. The Embassy reports that Kim Dae Jung's party is expected to win a majority of these seats, but will share some with popular local figures running on the ruling party's ticket.

Minor opposition parties probably will add to opposition numbers in the new Assembly, although it is difficult to predict how they will fare individually. Kim Jong Pil, leader of the third-largest opposition party, is sponsoring candidates nationwide, but his regional power base is smaller than those of the two Kims, making a big win unlikely. A handful of influential independent opposition candidates also have a good chance of winning their seats again.

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Beyond Tuesday

With a clear ruling party majority, Roh would be well positioned to fill the parliamentary leadership positions with trusted associates, and to control committee agendas and procedures. A strong showing also would strengthen his hand in reshuffling government and military posts to firm up his control of the ruling camp. According to the US Embassy, Chun holdovers in the Cabinet--such as the Justice and Home Affairs Ministers--may be first to go. On the military front, Roh may force some senior Chun loyalists appointed by the outgoing President in December to retire, according to US military officials in Seoul.

In such circumstances, opposition strategy is likely to focus on attacking Roh's reform record to spark popular dissatisfaction. Opposition politicians, particularly dissidents in Kim Dae Jung's camp, may also try to coordinate their campaign with the series of student demonstrations planned as a lead-up to the 17 May anniversary of the Chun government's suppression of the Kwangju riots in 1980. So far, however, students and opposition politicians alike have failed to generate public support for street rallies.

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The opposition's troubles will increase over the longer term, in our view. If the two Kims win roughly equal blocs in the Assembly, their rivalry is almost certain to dominate opposition politics. This is likely to thwart the rise of young leaders who

could shift opposition politics from personalities to issues. Weaker-than-expected showings for either Kim would not necessarily bring a smooth transition to new faces, however. We would expect substantial infighting and splintering of the parties before a new opposition lineup emerged. [REDACTED]

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Should the ruling party fail to take a majority--at least 112 elected seats--the government would have to build coalitions to pass routine legislation. The party's more moderate image under Roh probably would facilitate efforts to link up with minor opposition party members and independents, who will be looking to amplify their power by forming alliances with larger parties. Political observers estimate minor opposition and independent candidates could take anywhere from 15 to 45 seats. With such a pool of free agents, the ruling party would not be locked into dealing with the Kims. [REDACTED]

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A freely contested National Assembly election will encourage further political liberalization in South Korea. The key test for both the ruling party and the main opposition parties will be whether they can master the politics of consensus-building--rather than the winner-take-all game typical in Korea--enabling the Assembly to become an element in the balance of power. Longstanding patterns of political confrontation--and deep-seated opposition concerns about being labeled government "stooges"--will make it difficult for the main protagonists to quickly learn to compromise, in our view. [REDACTED]

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SOUTH KOREA: OUTLOOK FOR THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTION

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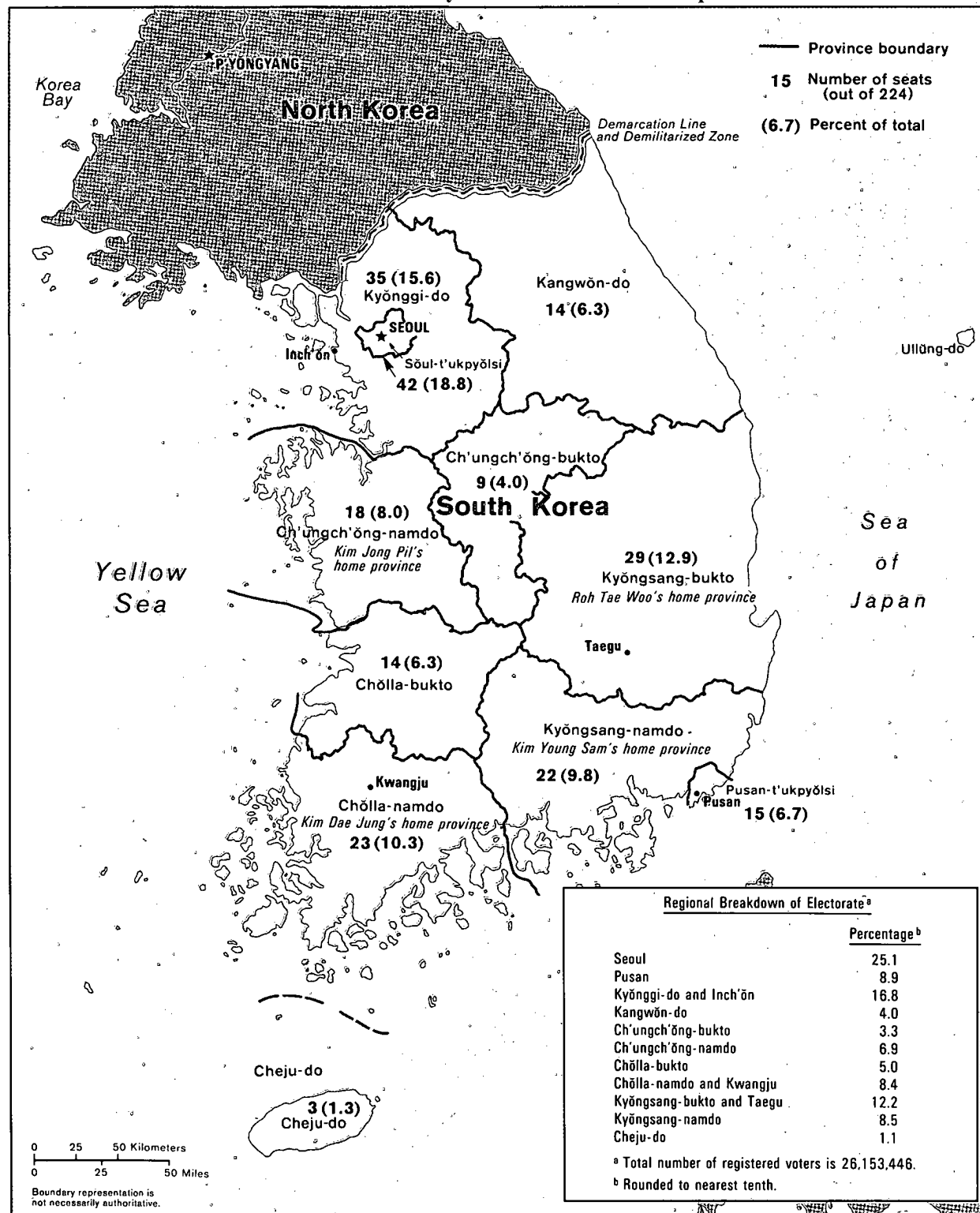
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